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By-Danielson, Ruth

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The narrator, or non-hero, in Ralph Ellison's novel, "Invisible Man," has no identify, does not know who he is, and, as he runs from one attempt at identity to another is repeatedly confronted with the nightmare inscription, "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger Boy Running." This philosophical-spiritual state of invisibility ultimately forces the non-hero into a cellar after a series of encounters with people, black and white, who use him and then drop him. Although the narrator has begun to realize his own lack of identity through his activities with the Brotherhood in Harlem, it is in the cellar with 1,369 light bulbs that he acknowledges his invisibility. He is thus freed from the necessity of running in order to pursue identity, and can now help others fight for the principle of individuality. Ellison's personal idiom of burlesque, distortion, and fantasy creates an imaginative and surrealistically effective novel. (JM)

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"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN; KEEP THIS NIGGER-BOY RUNNING"

by Ruth Danielson, Concordia College

After the prologue to Invisible Man, in the first paragraph of chapter 1, appears this statement by the narrator: "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I,

and only I, could answer." (19)

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is a novel of ambiguity, of running, of searching, and of not-seeing. The non-hero is invisible because he has no identity; he does not know who he is. As he runs from situation to situation, forced on by authority, he finds that each new identity leads him back to confront once again the inscription "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." (35)

The prologue of Invisible Man is unique. It isn't a prologue at all. It is a part of the epilogue. The non-hero (so-called because of his lack of identity) has experienced a number of identities and has discovered his invisibility. It is in this philosophical-spiritual state of invisibility in which we first see him. He is in a cellar which has been shut off from the rest of the building since the nineteenth century. Because his faith in his reality has been shaken, he surrounds himself with 1,369 light bulbs to illuminate his reality, to assure himself that he really does exist.

In the major portion of the novel the narrator relates the experiences which have forced him into his cellar. These experiences are steps in the process of stripping the non-hero of all his illusions. Only then can he finally realize that he is his experiences and his experiences are what define him.

When the non-hero is a very young boy, he receives some strange advice from his grandfather. As his grandfather is dying, he says, "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." (19-20) Basically the Negro community knows that this is the way to maintain themselves within the white hierarchy, but to actually articulate the idea was taboo. The boy is haunted by this advice. He puzzles over it in his cellar. He decides that his grandfather had meant saying "yes" to a principle rather than to men. All men have this principle within them. Since the narrator realizes this, he sees his responsibility for affirming rather than negating it. The adversaries of the principle of individualism would eventually destroy themselves.

As a boy the narrator is a model Negro student. At his high school graduation he gives a properly humble speech which pleases the principal very much. He asks the narrator to repeat the speech at a smoker which will be attended by all of the town's leading citizens. First, however, he is forced to fight in a battle royal with several other Negro boys. Because of his ideals and accomplishments he had never associated with these boys in the past. He feels superior to them, and they are aware of it.

As a preliminary to the battle royal the boys must watch a sensuous blond nude who is dancing at the smoker. This scene

illustrates the ambiguity of the Negro world. The boys are threatened if they do watch the girl, and they are threatened if they don't. They try to hide themselves or try to run away. The image of the sensual dance is superimposed on the image of the leering, grasping, drunken white men who watch the naked dancer and taunt the boys. The dancer sees the horror of it and looks at the white men with disgust.

The experience of the battle royal itself is an experience in ambiguity. The boys are blindfolded and are forced to fight each other. They lose all sense of direction and all sense of working as a unit. They are fighting each other for no reason instead of fighting the power and authority which have deprived them of their individuality and their sight.

After this brutal and humiliating ordeal the boy gives his speech. Blinded by his own blood and his still-intact illusions, he stumbles on. Although it is debatable how many of the men actually hear his speech, he manages to please them. As a reward for knowing his place, the principal gives him a calfskin briefcase. In it is a scholarship to a Southern Negro college. Later he dreams that his grandfather tells him to open the briefcase and read what is inside. Instead of his coveted scholarship he finds an engraved document which says, "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." (35)

Our non-hero gratefully accepts his scholarsip and goes to college with a head full of dreams and aspirations. Through his scholarship he feels that he has gained an identity. He identifies with his college and finds his ideal in Dr. Bledsoe.

However, the boy is blindfolded by Dr. Bledsoe just as he was blindfolded during the battle royal. Dr. Bledsoe allows people to see only what he wants them to see. He knows all of the ins and outs of the white world. He knows whose hand to shake, whose to kiss, and whose to ignore completely. Dr. Bledsoe may not have self-respect, but he does have power and is intent upon keeping it.

During his junior year at college, the narrator is given the task of driving for one of the trustees of the college--a Mr. Norton--during a week of special ceremonies to commemorate the founding of the college. Unfortunately, through no intention of his own, he is forced to drive Mr. Norton out of the "whitewashed" section of town and into forbidden areas. After a trying encounter with a Negro sharecropper named Jim Trueblood, Mr. Norton finds himself in urgent need of a stimulant. Consequently the narrator and Mr. Norton find themselves in a prostitute-inhabited roadhouse named the Golden Day. When they arrive, they find the shell-shocked veterans from a nearby institution visiting the establishment. Ironically, the boy is blind and Mr. Norton is blind, but a shell-shocked "doctor" has 20-20 vision. He makes two very perceptive comments. One to Mr. Norton, speaking of

the narrator: "He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (86) To both Mr. Norton and the boy: "Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other." (87)

Naturally Dr. Bledsoe can't tolerate such a breach of whitewash. Mr. Norton had been allowed to see things which he was not supposed to see. The boy becomes a threat to Dr. Bledsoe's authority. Dr. Bledsoe calls him "Nigger" and says "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging by treelimbs in the morning if it means staying where I am." (128) He doesn't hang our non-hero from a tree limb, but he neatly disposes of him. He gives him ten letters of "introduction" to put into his briefcase and sends him to New York. The boy is forced to leave the college that has educated him in the myths of the blind Rev. Barbee.

The narrator is still blind when he leaves college, but one of his illusions has been shattered. He knows now that there is no such thing as racial unity upon which he can rely. His idol, Dr. Bledsoe, who symbolizes intellect, wealth, power, and everything else our non-hero desires, has called him "Nigger." He has said, "You don't exist--can't you see that?" (128)

The narrator puts his college identity into his briefcase together with the ten letters of "introduction" and boards a bus bound for a new identity in New York. On the bus, much to his distress, he meets the shell-shocked "doctor" of the Golden Day episode. Again the boy is confronted with his invisibility but fails to see it. "You're hidden right out in the open--that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of that." (137)

Little by little, New York proves to be an enlightening experience. After nine unsuccessful attempts at jobs through his letters, the narrator arrives at Mr. Emerson's office. Mr. Emerson's son reveals to him the true contents of the letters. They tell of his disgracing the college and specifically state that no help is to be given to him. This new treachery on the part of Dr. Bledsoe disillusions our non-hero even more. He begins to see a little more: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me and beneath that some more secret plan." (170) For his race and for himself he thinks of killing Dr. Bledsoe. Only later does he develop an identity divorced from his race.

Mr. Emerson's son sends the narrator to Liberty Paints where he gets a job. First, he encounters Mr. Kimbro who "Keeps America Pure With Liberty Paints" through his pride and joy "Optic White." The non-hero's first task is to doctor up some Optic White (which is destined for a national monument) by stirring in ten drops of a black liquid until it disappears. By mistake he adds ten drops of concentrated remover. Unwittingly he has sabotaged the "national whitewash."

Next he is passed on to Lucius Brockway whose workshop is the cellar of Liberty Paints. He is the symbol of the black base upon which our nation's industry is built. He is hidden in a cellar and yet he is the one who makes the base for all of the paint produced by Liberty Paints. He knows every inch of his cellar and, like Dr. Bledsoe, he guards it jealously. Fearing that the narrator is a union "fink," he provokes him into a fight. During the scuffle, they forget about checking the pressure gauges on the vats and there is an explosion.

The narrator is then taken to the factory hospital. Here, in a science-fiction setting, he achieves a rebirth. When doctors ask him who he is, he finally realizes that he has no name. He has no identity and must search for himself. As he is being released from the shock-giving apparatus, the doctor cuts an electric cord to his stomach node, and he is born again.

After leaving the hospital, our non-hero faints on the sidewalk and is taken over by a good-hearted woman named Mary. She is a firm believer in "the race" and becomes a force pressing a new identity upon him. She sees him as a great leader of "the race." She doesn't see him as an individual. He has to leave her because she is smothering him with her love of "the race." Always in his mind are the questions "Who was I, how had I come to Be?" Mary's silent pressure, combined with these questions, pushes him out into the street.

The narrator walks the streets for several hours. In the course of his wanderings he comes upon the scene of an eviction. A crowd has gathered to watch. Everyone is indignant, but no one acts. The narrator's old love of making speeches combines with the emotions of the situation, and he jumps up on the steps to speak. The force of his words moves the crowd to action. As policemen come, the non-hero runs, but this speech has already provided him with a source for another identity.

Brother Jack has been watching the narrator harangue the crowd. Representing an organization called the Brotherhood, Brother Jack sees potential in the young man. The need for money and the need for an identity lead him to accept the opportunity proffered by Brother Jack. He is even given a new name by the organization. It is never disclosed because it is merely a name written on a piece of paper.

The young man throws himself whole-heartedly into his activities. He chafes a little under the rigid ideological system, but he rationalizes it as necessary for effective operation. Even when the Brotherhood decides that he is becoming too dangerous in Harlem and moves him downtown to lecture on women's rights, he accepts it. He doesn't know it, but they see in him the beginnings of an individual. He doesn't realize that he ispotentially unsafe. He decides to consider the new appointment a challenge to be accepted and overcome.

Suddenly the narrator finds himself back in Harlem. He has become an outsider, but he sees an opportunity in Brother Clifton's death to regain the people's confidence. He organizes a funeral and involves the entire community. Again the Brotherhood tries to discipline him. He is called a "petty individualist." (437) Brother Jack tells him "You were not hired to think." (361)

Now the narrator really begins to see. He realizes that the Brotherhood does not see him. He has no identity with them. He is merely obeying authority. Jack is blind. He probably sees more through his glass eye than through his real one. He, too, is blindly obeying authority. None of the brothers has an identity. They are just names written on slips of paper.

Again the narrator ends up on the streets. During his life with the Brotherhood, he has had several conflicts with a radical Black Nationalist called Ras the Exhorter. Now he finds it necessary to effect a disguise for safety. A pair of dark green sunglasses and a broad-rimmed hat hide him from sight.

Ironically, this attempt to hide his identity forces another identity upon the non-hero. He looks like a certain Rinehart who seems to have the characteristics of a chameleon. He is a different person for everyone he meets. Rinehart is a minister, a numbers runner, a gambler, a lover. Rinehart is a rounder. Our non-hero begins to see the absurdity of this world which accepts all the Rineharts and Dr. Bledsoes and Brother Jacks. He sees "whites escaping blackness and becoming blacker; blacks striving for whiteness and becoming dull gray." (499)

The last experience before he takes up his life in the cellar is a race riot analogous to the Harlem race riot of August, 1943. In the crush of men the narrator's sunglasses (which were in his briefcase) are broken. He is left without a disguise. First he is pursued by Ras. Having eluded him, he is then pursued by a group of young whites. In the darkness he cannot see where he is running and falls into an open manhole. In order to find his way through this new blackness, he is forced to burn all of the papers in his briefcase. His scholarship, his Brotherhood name, and all the other papers connecting him with his past experiences are destroyed.

In time sequence the prologue fits here. It is at this point that the narrator establishes himself in the cellar with his 1,369 light bulbs. After thinking about his identity and his invisibility, our non-hero now decides to take his grandfather's advice and act. His hibernation underground has been a preparation for action. He sees the "possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play." (303) He is making plans and looking forward to coming out of his cellar. He is going to affirm the principle. His knowledge of his invisibility frees him from the necessity for running. He has destroyed the briefcase and all of its "identities." He is free to aid in the

destruction of those who would destroy the principle of individuality.

Invisible Man is written in Ellison's personal idiom of burlesque, distortion and fantasy; it is highly imaginative and quite surrealistic in effect. According to Robert Bone in his book The Negro Novel in America, this idiom enables Ellison to successfully prove his reality. Bone says, "Invisible Man, then, is a stubborn affirmation of the worth and dignity of the individual in the face of forces which conspire to render him invisible."